

The National Park Service (NPS) invites you to review and comment on three alternatives that will be evaluated during the development of a Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan (Plan) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (Black Canyon NP) and Curecanti National Recreation Area (Curecanti NRA). The NPS released a Plan and EA for public review in September of 2011. The completion of that Plan was temporarily suspended while the NPS deliberated its response to public comments received during the review period. It is with great pleasure that we now release a modified set of alternatives that take those public comments into consideration.

You are invited to review a detailed description of each alternative below. Please help us save paper and submit your comments at this NPS Park Planning Web Site: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/> under "Projects with Documents Open for Comment" look for Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park... Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan/Environmental Assessment. Please provide comments by March 21, 2016.

Alternatively, you can submit written comments to:

Wilderness Coordinator
Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP/Curecanti NRA
102 Elk Creek
Gunnison, CO 81230
E-mail: cure_info@nps.gov (Subject: Wilderness Plan)

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PLAN

Black Canyon NP and Curecanti NRA include high-quality wilderness and backcountry resources and experiences, with increasing pressures for some activities. Potential expanded recreational opportunities require planning with the user public to ensure the future availability of these high-quality experiences and resources.

The focus of the Plan is the wilderness and undeveloped backcountry of Black Canyon NP, and the land-based backcountry visitor activities and resources at Curecanti NRA.

The purpose of this Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan is to provide an integrated framework for decision making for the stewardship of wilderness and backcountry lands of Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and Curecanti NRA. This Plan is needed because underlying trends, if not addressed in planning and management strategies, could result in the establishment of incompatible uses and entrenched harmful practices, which in turn, could impact natural resources, quality visitor opportunities, and wilderness and backcountry character.

Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and Curecanti NRA feature high-quality backcountry and wilderness resources and experiences. The Black Canyon of the Gunnison is an impressive canyon combining steepness, narrowness, ruggedness, color, and depth unique in North America. The wildness of the canyon, canyon rims, and uplands has been recognized and preserved through proclamations and legislation, including designation and expansion of wilderness. The Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP wilderness character is a unique combination of untrammelled (e.g., unrestrained, unrestricted), natural, undeveloped qualities and opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation, which could substantially change without the foresight of good planning and management. The rugged, vertical landscape offers unparalleled opportunities for self-reliance and challenge.

Concentrated visitor use within portions of the inner canyon (area below the canyon rims to the Gunnison River), require attention and planning to ensure that high-quality experiences and resources remain available for future generations. Within the inner canyon, human manipulation of the natural environment threatens the natural qualities of wilderness. Structures, including toilets, diminish the undeveloped quality of wilderness, while management actions detract from the untrammeled quality of wilderness.

Current management of Curecanti NRA is focused on water-based visitor activities (e.g., fishing, boating, sailing, wind surfing, waterskiing, etc.) and resources. The land area above the high water level of the three reservoirs (Blue Mesa, Morrow Point, Crystal) expresses distinct undeveloped character, natural conditions, and opportunities for backcountry visitor experiences. The terrain from East Portal to Morrow Point comprises a scenic, rugged canyon that is natural and remote. The area surrounding Blue Mesa Reservoir is undeveloped and an important scenic backdrop for boaters, campers, and travelers on U.S. Highway 50 (U.S. 50). There are unrealized opportunities to improve land-based natural and cultural resource conditions and visitor experiences.

Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and Curecanti NRA include high-quality backcountry and wilderness resources and experiences, with increasing pressure for some activities including climbing and fishing access into the inner canyon, illegal buildings, antennae, spans, and earth (B.A.S.E.) jumping. Potential expanded recreational opportunities require planning with the user public to ensure the future availability of high-quality experiences and resources.

ALTERNATIVES

The three alternatives available for your review and comment include:

1) **Alternative A (No-Action)**: Under this alternative, the NPS would continue existing management without implementation of the Plan. Current management direction and prevailing conditions derived from existing planning documents would continue. Appropriate and allowable uses and restrictions pertaining to activities would remain the same. The no-action does not imply or direct discontinuance of the present action or removing existing uses, developments, or facilities;

2) **Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)**: The preferred alternative presents management strategies and options for meeting the purpose and need of the proposed action and defines the rationale for the action in terms of resource protection and management, visitor and operational use, and other applicable factors. The preferred alternative describes the implementation of the Plan's comprehensive approach to wilderness management that is based on maintaining or improving wilderness character in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison Wilderness area and maintaining or improving backcountry quality in Curecanti NRA.

This alternative authorizes necessary and appropriate commercial services in the Gunnison Gorge and Uplands Wilderness Zones and allows for the authorization of commercial guided climbing services in portions of the Inner Canyon Wilderness Zone of Black Canyon NP. It also authorizes necessary and appropriate commercial services in the Blue Mesa and East Portal Morrow Point Zones of Curecanti NRA;

3) **Alternative C**: This alternative is the same as Alternative B in every way except that it eliminates commercial services in the Inner Canyon Wilderness Zone of Black Canyon NP.

ALTERNATIVE A (NO-ACTION ALTERNATIVE)

The no-action alternative continues existing management programs and practices in the wilderness and backcountry areas of Black Canyon NP and Curecanti NRA. Under the no-action alternative the NPS would respond to future needs and conditions associated with backcountry and wilderness management without major changes in currently defined and approved actions, programs, and plans.

Resources, including natural resources, cultural resources, water quality, scenic resources, etc., would continue to be managed under various federal and state laws, NPS policies and programs, and Black Canyon NP/Curecanti NRA-specific resource management plans. Many resources would be managed in cooperation with other federal and state agencies, including the Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). Resources would be inventoried and monitored.

Administrative activities would continue to include maintenance, law enforcement, restoration projects, resource monitoring, interpretation and education, and fire and rescue activities. Currently, the park has multiple efforts underway in which it communicates wilderness and backcountry skills and ethics. Those include contact with visitor center staff as wilderness users obtain permits, a wilderness brochure, and a wilderness and backcountry video as part of many interpretive and education programs.

Current management actions and plans that contain management direction and actions for wilderness and backcountry areas in Black Canyon NP and Curecanti NRA would continue under the no-action alternative and include:

- 1997 Black Canyon and Curecanti General Management Plan (NPS 1997)
- Interim Climbing Management Plan
- Minimum Requirements Decision Guide (MRDG)
- Curecanti Resource Protection Study/Environmental Impact Statement (August 2008)
- Fire Management Plan, Curecanti NRA/Black Canyon NP (October 2006)
- Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park Resource Management Plan
- Curecanti NRA Motorized Vehicle Access Plan/Environmental Assessment (October 2010)
- Foundation Document, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (December 2013)
- Foundation Document, Curecanti National Recreation Area (December 2013)

Under the no-action alternative, the recent wilderness eligibility assessment, which determined an additional 8,447 acres to be eligible or potentially eligible for full wilderness study and for possible inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system, would be managed so that no actions taken by the NPS would diminish the wilderness eligibility of the lands possessing wilderness characteristics until the legislative process of wilderness designation has been completed.

In addition, the NPS would ensure that actions and programs are consistent with:

- The Wilderness Act of 1964, 16 USC §§ 1131–1136, September 3, 1964, as amended 1978
- National Park Service Director's Order 41: Wilderness Preservation and Management
- The Black Canyon of the Gunnison Wilderness Legislation

The no-action alternative provides a baseline for evaluating changes and prescribing mitigation, as appropriate, for potential management alternatives. This baseline is characterized primarily by current conditions as they are understood in 2010.

CURRENT USE AND MANAGEMENT ACTIONS BY GEOGRAPHIC AREA

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL PARK

Black Canyon NP includes 30,750 acres, of which 15,599 acres (50%) are designated wilderness. An additional 8,447 acres have been determined to be eligible or potentially eligible for full wilderness study and would be managed to protect wilderness character until the legislative process is complete. There are 7,198 acres of non-wilderness, including federal and private lands (Figure 1).

Black Canyon: Inner Canyon Wilderness Area

Resource Management— Peregrine falcons nest in the inner canyon, and under the Superintendent's Compendium, closures to climbing areas would be applied during the nesting season. There would be no livestock grazing allotments in this area and wildland fires would be managed to meet resource objectives (generally confined by the canyon rim and steep canyon walls). Invasive plant species would be actively managed, specifically tamarisk (*Tamarix ramosissima*). The Gunnison River is classified under the Gold Medal Water designation. No fish stocking would occur in the inner canyon.

Visitor Use— Day use of the inner canyon would continue to be managed by a self-registration wilderness permit system; group size would be limited to current sizes. Visitor use of Red Rock Canyon would continue to be managed by a lottery permit system. Overnight camping would also be managed by wilderness permit and the number of permits set at current limits. Access would be along narrow steep routes from the canyon rim, or from the BLM-managed Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area to the west. Pets would not be allowed. Campfires would not be allowed.

Common activities include rock climbing (which would be managed under the Interim Climbing Management Plan), hiking, fishing (requires a Colorado fishing license), ice climbing, and wildlife viewing. Paragliding and B.A.S.E. jumping would not be allowed. Horseback riding would not occur. Mechanized equipment would not be allowed, nor would hunting and trapping activities. There would continue to be a commercial use authorization for guided climbing services.

Development— Development in the inner canyon would remain minimal and include two vault toilets; there would be evidence of campsites; signage would be minimal.

Administration— Aircraft and mechanized equipment would not be allowed in the inner canyon, except during emergency operations or when absolutely critical for the protection of natural and cultural resources. These actions would continue to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis using the MRDG process that would be approved by the superintendent. The MRDG process would be the documentation process used to determine the appropriateness of all actions affecting wilderness (NPS 1999). The MRDG process has two-steps that document: (1) a determination as to whether or not a proposed management action is appropriate or necessary for the administration of the area as wilderness, and does not pose a significant impact to the wilderness resources and character; and (2) if the project is appropriate or necessary in wilderness, the selection of the management method that causes the least amount of impact to physical resources and wilderness character. Scientific research projects and monitoring studies would also require a MRDG process.

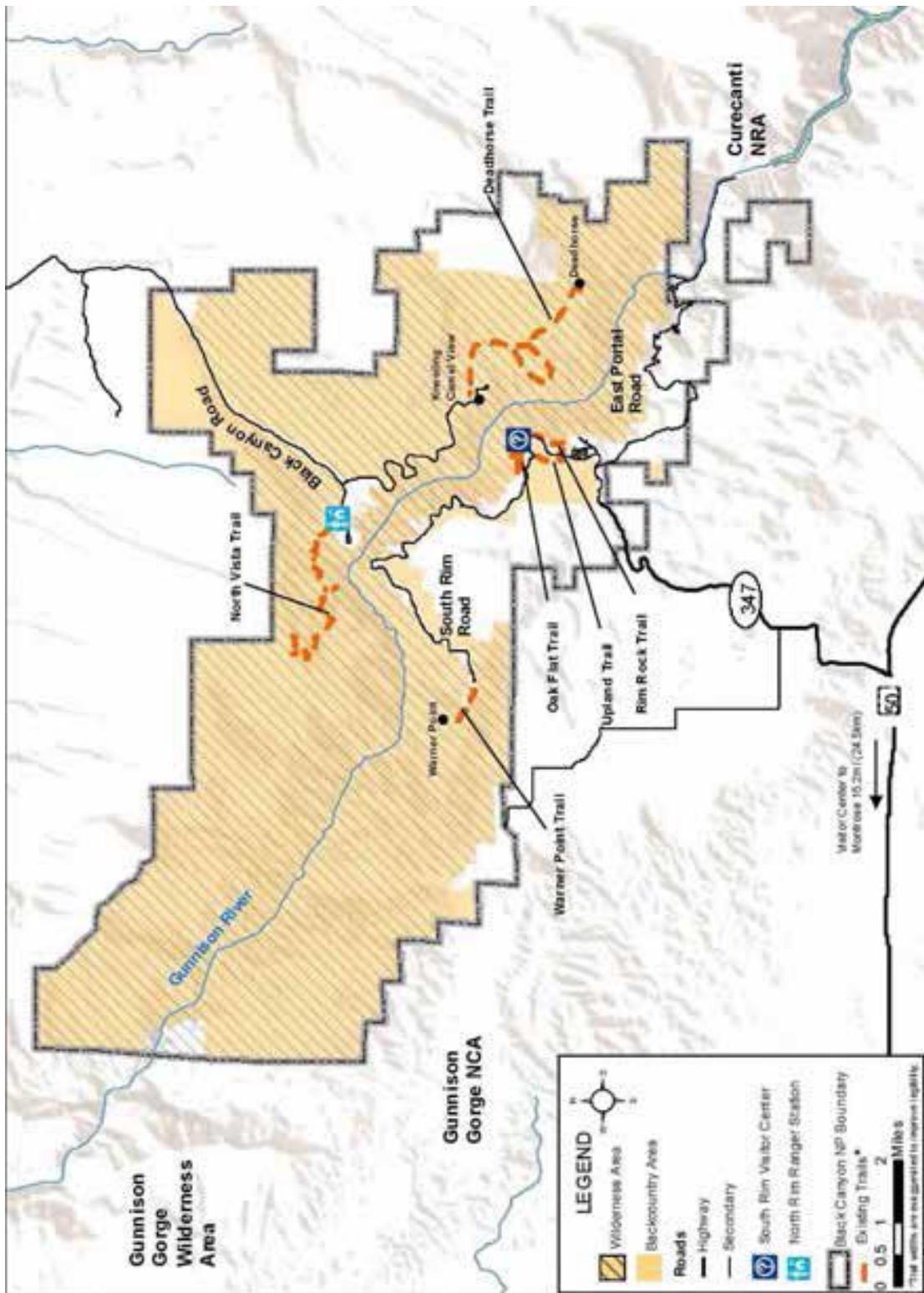


FIGURE 1. EXISTING Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park Area MAP

Black Canyon: Uplands

Resource Management— Existing livestock grazing allotments would continue in this area in accordance with existing legislated guidance. Prescribed burns would be used as a management tool and invasive species would be actively managed. Portions of the Black Canyon uplands contain important habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Adjacent land use and development would be addressed under current management strategies.

Visitor Use— Visitor use would include camping, hiking, horseback riding, and winter activities. The North Rim campground is in the developed zone and does not require permits. Dispersed camping in the wilderness and backcountry would be allowed and would not require a permit. There would continue to be two wilderness trails—Deadhorse Trail and North Vista Trail (horseback riding would be allowed on Deadhorse Trail); hiking would be allowed throughout this area. Pets on leash are allowed on roads, in campgrounds, to the overlooks, and are allowed on Rim Rock Trail, Cedar Point Nature Trail, and North Rim Chasm View Nature Trail. Pets are not allowed on any other hiking trails or in wilderness areas. Hunting and trapping would not be allowed. Mechanized equipment (including bicycles) would not be allowed in the wilderness. Visitor access would occur from the South Rim or Black Canyon roads in the developed areas of Black Canyon NP.

Development— Development would include trails, some grazing-related structures (stock ponds, corrals, etc.), and minimal signage.

Administration— Aircraft (fixed-wing or helicopter) and mechanized equipment would not be allowed in the designated wilderness, except during emergency operations or actions that are critical for the protection of natural and cultural resources. Each operation or action would be determined on a case-by-case basis through a MRDG process approved by the park superintendent. Scientific research projects and monitoring activities would also need an approved MRDG process. There could be commercial use authorizations made available for hiking, camping, and educational tours in the uplands area.

Interface Area with Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area. The western boundary of Black Canyon NP would be jointly managed by the BLM and the NPS. The BLM recently acquired additional land near the Black Canyon NP wilderness boundary and Red Rock Canyon trailhead. A camping area near the common boundary area on the Gunnison River, known as Margaritaville, would be accessed by hikers or rafters from Chukar Trail, beginning on the BLM trailhead access from Chukar Road. There would continue to be two designated campsites at Margaritaville—one for rafters and one for hike-in users. Campers would register at the BLM Chukar Trail trailhead kiosk to access the Margaritaville site. The BLM manages commercial use permits for rafting, float fishing, and hiking/fishing trips that originate from these campsites.

All walk-in users would be encouraged to carry disposable human waste bags. These bags are currently issued free with user permits at the Chukar trailhead. All boaters would be required to carry and use a portable toilet system. A small turnout on Chukar Road connects to an old road grade that extends from BLM land into the NPS uplands and an overlook with a view of the gorge. It would continue to be an undesignated trail.

BLM managers would continue to allow users one-night camping on any site for boaters and two-night camping for hikers. There would be a limit on users of Margaritaville sites (12 individuals); it would continue to be used sparingly, except during the June–July stonefly hatch when many anglers hike along or boat up the river to fish. Entry limits in place by the NPS at the Red Rock Canyon trailhead during the hatch would continue to push use to BLM-managed land downstream of the Red Rock Canyon access.

Although the NPS and BLM jointly manage the boundary interface, they would continue to have different rules. For example, the BLM allows leashed dog access, but the NPS does not. There are differences in the user fee permit structure for national conservation area wilderness and the NPS Red Rock Canyon access lottery. The BLM allows users to pack in and light charcoal fires in pans and requires packing out the pan and ashes (there is no wood collecting or burning); the NPS does not allow any type of fires in the interface zone.

CURECANTI NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Curecanti NRA administers a relatively narrow section of land adjacent to the elongated Crystal, Morrow Point, and Blue Mesa reservoirs extending eastward approximately 40 miles from the eastern border of Black Canyon NP, and in the Gunnison River valley. Curecanti NRA comprises approximately 41,255 acres of federal lands and waters; approximately 75% is land (NPS 2008). Curecanti NRA is surrounded by mostly undeveloped land managed by the BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and CPW, and private property (figure 2).

There are no lands managed by the NPS within the administrative boundary of Curecanti NRA that are eligible or potentially eligible for wilderness study at this time.

Starting with the completion of Blue Mesa Reservoir in 1967, the Gunnison River transformed this locale into a water-based recreation destination. Approximately one million visitors use Curecanti NRA facilities annually; the peak user season is from Memorial Day to Labor Day, with activities focusing on water-based recreation and camping. Water-related activities, which are not addressed in this Plan, include fishing and the use of houseboats, powerboats, canoes, sailboats, sailboards, and kayaks. Land-based, backcountry recreational activities include sightseeing, photography, wildlife viewing, hunting, hiking, backpacking, backcountry camping, horseback riding, and picnicking. In winter, Curecanti NRA supports a variety of activities including snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and ice fishing.

Curecanti: East Portal-Morrow Point. East Portal-Morrow Point (EPMP) comprises the land between the Blue Mesa Dam site and the boundary of Black Canyon NP.

Resource Management— Resources would be inventoried and monitored, including peregrine falcons and other species that nest on cliff ledges and in alcoves of EPMP. Under the Superintendent's Compendium, closures to sites would be implemented during the nesting season. There would continue to be livestock grazing allotments in this area. Prescribed burns could be used as a management tool (fire management plan), but have not been used to date.

Visitor Use— There would continue to be primitive campsites along the shorelines of Crystal and Morrow Point reservoirs, including Curecanti Creek and Hermit's Rest. The boat-in only campsite along Crystal Reservoir would continue to have a toilet, picnic table, and fire ring. The campsites along Morrow Point Reservoir would have toilets, picnic tables, and fire rings. Access to Curecanti Creek and Hermit's Rest would be by boat or foot; all other campsites would be exclusively boat-in. Additionally, there would continue to be three primitive campsites (one each) at Dead Man's Curve, Nelson's Gulch, and Blue Creek; the sites would be boat-in and have no facilities.

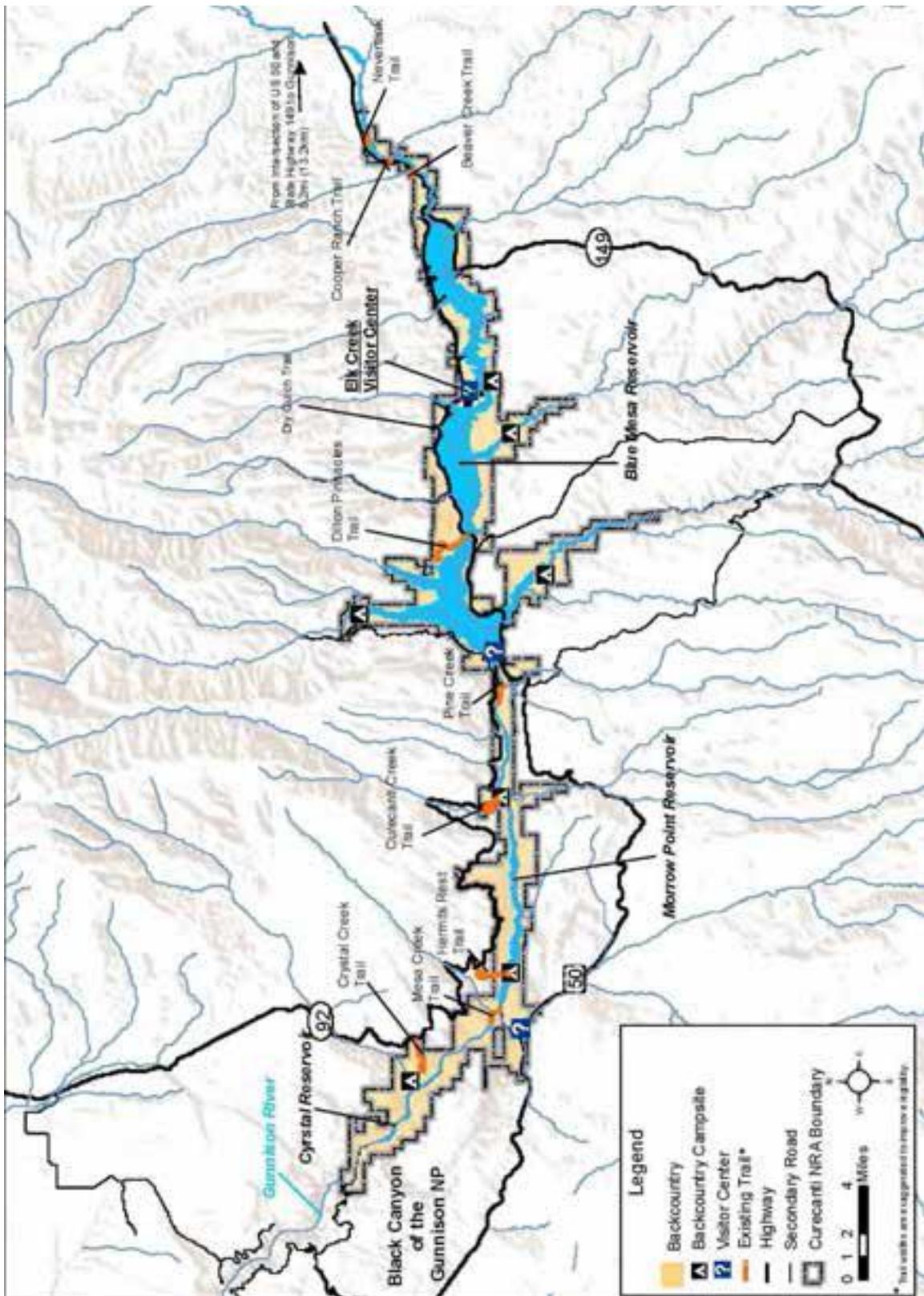


FIGURE 2. EXISTING Curecanti National Recreation Area MAP

Backcountry hiking trails include Mesa Creek, Hermit's Rest, Crystal Creek, Curecanti Creek, and Pine Creek. Other recreation activities include climbing, ice climbing, wildlife viewing, fishing, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. Leashed pets are allowed on hiking trails, but not on the Morrow Point boat tour. Hunting and trapping would continue to be allowed and regulated by CPW. There are currently no commercial services provided in EPMP; although land-based services and guided fishing on Morrow Point Reservoir would not be prohibited. Paragliding and hang gliding would not be a permitted use and they would not be allowed to land in Curecanti NRA without a permit, except in emergency situations (36 CFR Part 7). Access would be generally from the developed parking lots, turnouts, campgrounds, and picnic sites along State Highway 92 and U.S. 50, and other access roads.

Development— Development in the backcountry of EPMP would include primitive campsites, fire pits, toilets, and trails.

Administration— Permits would not be required for day use or overnight use.

Curecanti: Blue Mesa. Blue Mesa comprises the land between the eastern Curecanti NRA boundary near Neversink, west to Blue Mesa Dam.

Resource Management— Blue Mesa contains important habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse, a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Curecanti NRA would continue to be engaged in monitoring programs focused on Gunnison sage-grouse leks (strutting grounds) in cooperation with CPW. There would be livestock grazing allotments in this area. Prescribed burns could be used as a management tool as specified in the fire management plan.

Visitor Use— There would continue to be four backcountry/boat-in campgrounds within the backcountry of Blue Mesa, including West Elk, Lake Fork, Turtle Rock, and Cebolla. Backcountry camping would be allowed along the south shore of Blue Mesa Reservoir and on Red Creek Island (except within 0.5 mile of any developed area, bridge, maintained public road, or other boat-in/backcountry campsite). Dillon Pinnacles Trail would be the only backcountry trail in Blue Mesa. Leashed pets are allowed on the trail. Additional recreational activities include wildlife viewing, hunting, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and ice fishing.

Access would be generally from the developed parking lots, turnouts, campgrounds, and picnic sites along State Highways 92 and 149, and U.S. 50, and other access roads. Boat-in campgrounds would be accessed from the reservoir.

Hunting and trapping would be allowed and regulated by CPW. Horseback riding would be allowed on Dillon Pinnacles Trail and a commercial use authorization for commercial horse service would remain in place. Hang gliders and paragliders would not be permitted to launch from Blue Mesa and would not be allowed to land without a permit, except in emergency situations (36 CFR Part 7).

Development— Development in the backcountry of Blue Mesa would include primitive campsites, toilets, fire pits, trails, and livestock grazing structures (stock ponds, corrals, etc.).

Administration— Permits would not be required for day or overnight use.

ALTERNATIVE B (PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE) — WILDERNESS AND BACKCOUNTRY MANAGEMENT PLAN

The proposed action is a comprehensive approach to wilderness and backcountry management that is based on maintaining or improving wilderness and backcountry qualities in Black Canyon NP, and to maintain or improve backcountry qualities in Curecanti NRA. Because this Plan intentionally addresses backcountry and wilderness in both national park system units, the proposed action offers a spectrum of wilderness and backcountry opportunities. Management zones in this alternative would identify desired conditions and management for different areas throughout both units. At one end of the spectrum, the inner canyon of Black Canyon would be managed to be wild, natural, rugged, remote, and provide adventure and the experience of self-reliance. At the other end of the spectrum, Blue Mesa backcountry would be managed to be uncrowded, natural, expansive, open, and rural, with a variety of recreational opportunities supported by trails, campsites, and other appropriate backcountry facilities.

The proposed action would be actively engaged in preserving the unique wilderness qualities of the inner Black Canyon. The current access permit system, with ceilings on access points, would be adopted, along with a set of measures and standards for adaptively managing the system. A change from the no-action alternative would require visitors in the primitive zone to camp in designated campsites only, for resource protection. Over time, a pack-it-out system for human waste would be phased in and existing composting toilets would be removed. The transition would involve a period of widespread visitor information-sharing, -testing, and -monitoring. The inner canyon would continue to have rugged routes rather than developed trails.

New trails would be proposed in the uplands of Black Canyon NP and in Curecanti NRA. Unique opportunities for remote backcountry camping in Curecanti NRA would continue, particularly recognizing and protecting opportunities for solitude along the Crystal and Morrow Point reservoirs. This alternative also proposes new trails and new uses on existing trails, improving connections from trailheads in the Blue Mesa area to adjacent public lands.

One of the objectives of the Plan is to define the role of commercial guides and services in wilderness and backcountry areas. Using the management framework and management zones, commercial services have been evaluated to determine whether or not they are appropriate and necessary, using the guidance of NPS concession management laws, regulations, policies, and the goals and objectives of this wilderness and backcountry plan. Commercial services were evaluated within each management zone, and those that have been identified as appropriate are described within the respective zones in this alternative.

The proposed action would adopt, with modifications, the Interim Climbing Management Plan. The proposed climbing management plan emphasizes “clean climbing,” requires authorization for new fixed anchors, and closely manages new routes to meet the desired conditions for protection of the wilderness character in the inner canyon of Black Canyon NP. The climbing management plan would be expanded to address Curecanti NRA, and would aim at meeting the desired backcountry conditions in that area.

A goal of the Plan is to enhance public understanding of the relevance of wilderness and backcountry values and opportunities, with an objective to provide public information to promote backcountry skills and wilderness ethics. In this alternative, both parks would develop a long-range interpretive plan that would address wilderness and backcountry as interpretive themes, and make suggestions as to how wilderness and backcountry education and interpretation should be addressed in future interpretive efforts. These suggestions may include wayside exhibits, signs, bulletin boards, publications (including the park newspaper), lesson plans as part of a suite of curriculum-based education programming available for teachers to select, inclusion as part of the Advanced Junior Ranger Program already in existence, and perhaps as a featured annual event.

It is important to note that Black Canyon NP presents an opportunity that is unusual in that the drive-by and walk-up viewpoints along both the north and south rims provide visitors with the ability to view wilderness that is otherwise inaccessible to them. This platform, this “outside looking in” ability, can be an opportunity to inspire visitors about wild places and introduce them to wilderness through wayside exhibits along the rim, as well as in self-guiding booklets and ranger-led programs.

In a recent survey of park visitors, 41% said they obtained information about the park through the Web site and 77% said they would use the information for future visits. This clearly indicates there are opportunities to increase wilderness awareness via the park Web site.

The park does not currently mark wilderness boundaries. This alternative calls for careful placement of wilderness signs on trails and routes at the boundary to give visitors notice they are entering a special place— unique and different. The wilderness signs might, if attractive enough, provide a photo opportunity for that nonimpact souvenir so many people seek.

Currently, information about wilderness and backcountry skills and ethics is provided as part of the permit process through wilderness brochures, bulletin boards, and videos. This alternative would contain a management framework to monitor wilderness character and take action if conditions change. Many corrective actions involve visitor education. For example, if human-bear interactions become a problem, the first course of action would be to provide visitors with more information about how to avoid encounters. Updating and delivering current information to visitors is an important management tool to protect wilderness character.

As in most education efforts, park staff must first be informed about what wilderness means, what the parameters of our wilderness are, and how we manage wilderness use. Wilderness education would be incorporated into annual training for new employees and continuing wilderness education encouraged for all employees. Increasing wilderness awareness—where it is, why it matters, and how to take care of it— among employees and the public would be improved by this diversity of education and interpretive efforts.

The administration of wilderness areas at Black Canyon NP requires a high standard of management as directed by Congress in The Wilderness Act. One specific requirement, section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act, pointedly prohibits certain uses and significantly constrains many administrative activities that would otherwise be considered appropriate for the federal public domain, including park backcountry areas. For that reason, this alternative would provide specific guidance on how park managers would make decisions affecting wilderness, consistent with the MRDG as well as specific guidance on scientific and research activities in wilderness.

Management Zones

Management zones have been proposed to identify how different areas of Black Canyon NP and Curecanti NRA wilderness and backcountry would be managed under this alternative. Descriptions about the desired conditions for wilderness and backcountry character and definitions for visitor opportunities and management approaches have been developed to maintain or improve conditions in each Black Canyon NP and Curecanti NRA wilderness and backcountry management zone. Management zones provide predictable expectations for wilderness and backcountry character and conditions.

The character and conditions would be monitored over time, providing an indication of trends. Indicators, measures, and standards would be developed and applied to the management zones. Indicators are distinct and important elements of wilderness quality and measures provide quantitative ways to assess the trend

of the indicator. Measures are assessed against the standards, and if trends indicate that wilderness character is diminishing, management actions would be implemented.

Different actions would be taken by the NPS in different zones with regard to desired conditions, trends, and management actions. Five management zones have been proposed: three for Black Canyon NP wilderness and backcountry areas and two for Curecanti NRA backcountry. In addition, subzones have been identified to effectively address Black Canyon NP wilderness areas (four subzones) and backcountry (one subzone).

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL PARK

Three management zones are proposed for the backcountry and designated and eligible wilderness areas (figure 3). Additional visitor activities are proposed in some zones.

Black Canyon: Inner Canyon Wilderness Zone

The inner canyon wilderness zone includes the canyon rims, canyon walls, and the canyon floor including the Gunnison River.

The principal desired conditions for the inner canyon wilderness zone would be wild, natural, and rugged. The zone is remote and provides for adventure. The experience would be challenging and the visitor would need to be self-reliant and equipped with wilderness skills. The objectives for wilderness qualities would be to protect and improve the untrammelled character, protect and improve natural quality, maintain and improve the undeveloped character, and preserve and improve opportunities for solitude.

Two subzones have been developed and would be applied to more efficiently manage the inner canyon wilderness zone: the primitive wilderness and pristine wilderness subzones described herein.

Inner Canyon Primitive Wilderness Subzone. The desired conditions described for this subzone would be unspoiled and uncrowded. Objectives would include improving solitude and reducing recreational facilities to improve primitive and unconfined recreation, self-reliance, and natural qualities. In the inner canyon primitive wilderness subzone, the natural qualities of the canyon floor and opportunities for solitude would be improved by designating campsites.

Inner Canyon Pristine Wilderness Subzone. The desired conditions described for this subzone are untamed, isolated, pure, and free. Visitors would need to be independent and skilled to safely access the subzone, and the area would foster peoples' connection to wild places. Objectives include: keeping the wildest area in Black Canyon NP wild; keeping the zone untrammelled; preserving premier opportunities for solitude and primitive, unconfined recreation; and inspiring those who enter and those who view from overlooks to value wild places.

Proposed Actions for Inner Canyon Wilderness Zones— To maintain and enhance existing opportunities for solitude for hikers, anglers, backcountry campers, climbers, and kayakers, the existing access permit system for the inner canyon wilderness zone would be continued to disperse use and avoid crowding. Visitor experience and resource conditions would be monitored (see indicators, measures, and standards) and if there are significant changes, adjustments to the permit system may be warranted. Self-reliance, challenge, and adventure would continue to be valued, and routes would remain unimproved, except for minor rerouting to mitigate specific erosion problems. There are no trails, and new trails would not be constructed. Pets would continue to be prohibited. A requirement for visitors to store their food and trash

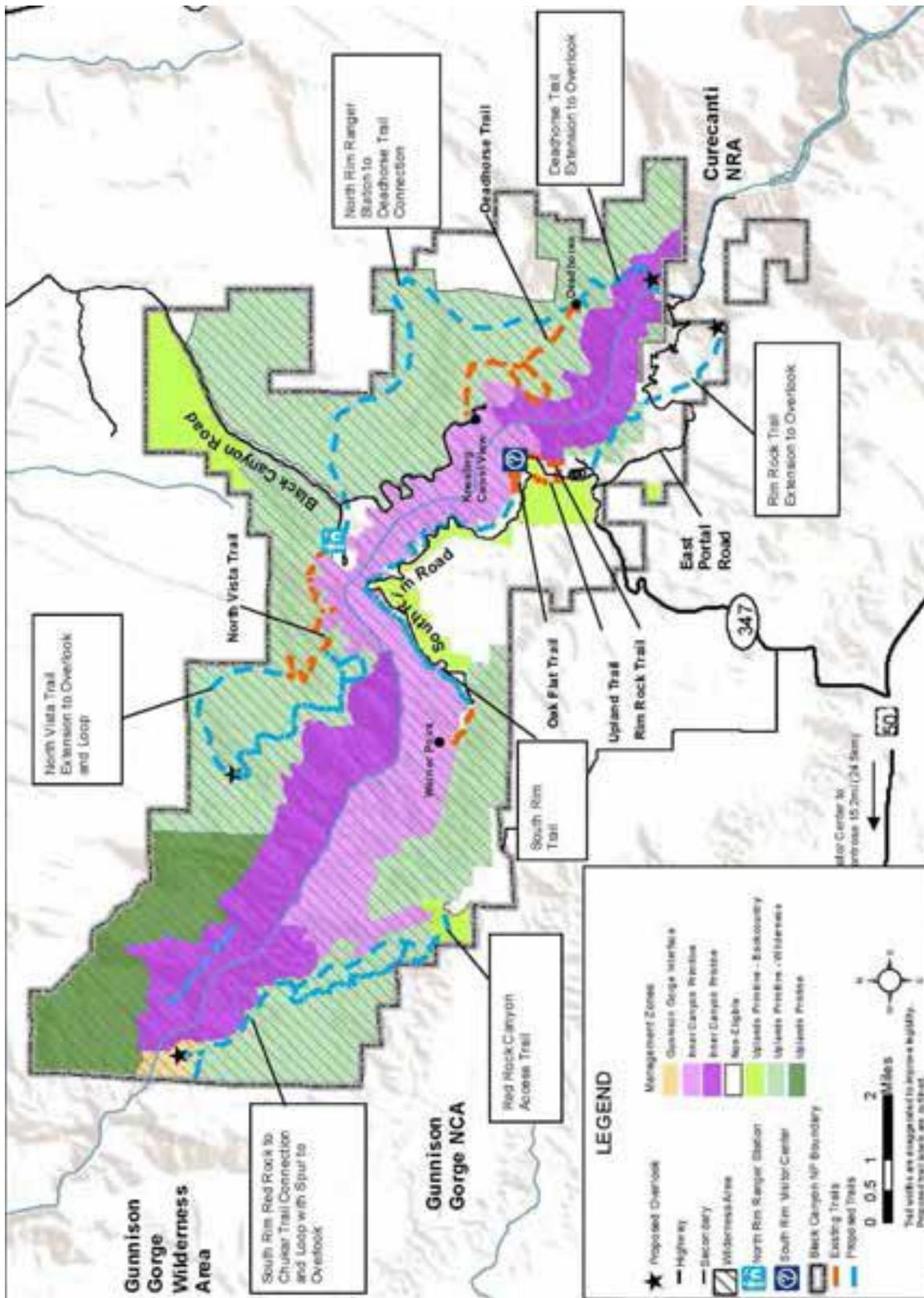


FIGURE 3. BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL PARK PROPOSED MANAGEMENT ZONES

in rodent- and bear-proof containers would be implemented to keep wildlife from becoming dependent on humans. No livestock use would be allowed in the inner canyon wilderness zone.

The primary difference in the management of the inner canyon pristine subzone and the inner canyon primitive wilderness subzone would be the management of overnight use and climbing.

Campsites would be designated in the inner canyon primitive wilderness zone, and would not be designated in the inner canyon pristine zone. Campsites would be monitored and adjusted to ensure that natural qualities are maintained or improved and to provide solitude by ensuring adequate distance between campsites.

In the inner canyon primitive wilderness subzone, natural qualities and self-reliance would be further improved by the removal of vault toilets and implementation of a pack-it-in/pack-it-out system using personal human waste pack-out bags for storage and transport. As part of maintaining and improving self-reliance, comprehensive guidance for signs in wilderness would be developed to ensure they are essential for route finding and as minimal and unobtrusive as possible.

The proposed climbing management plan would be adopted in the inner canyon wilderness zone to protect the natural and undeveloped quality of wilderness. The proposed climbing management plan would permit new fixed anchors or bolts in the inner canyon primitive zone with NPS authorization, but not in the inner canyon pristine zone. Motorized drills would not be allowed in either wilderness subzone. The impacts of fixed hardware and access routes on wilderness character would be monitored; management may be adjusted if warranted by a change in conditions. The peregrine falcon nesting activities would continue to be monitored and seasonal closures would be implemented to protect active nesting sites (ledges and alcoves in canyon walls).

To maintain and improve natural qualities in the inner canyon wilderness zone, tamarisk shrubs or small trees would continue to be monitored, and management actions enacted to reduce infestation and/or establishment. Obtaining a more natural flow regime would remain the centerpiece for the Gunnison River ecosystem and the NPS would continue to work with the Bureau of Reclamation to meet requirements of the Black Canyon water right decree and improve the untrammeled quality of wilderness. The NPS would pursue appropriate means to further recognize and protect the water quality of the Gunnison River. Management of wildland fires in the inner canyon wilderness zone would follow the current fire management plan and future fire management plans would focus on further enhancement of wilderness character. Baseline soundscape and night sky data would be collected and conditions monitored. To maintain and improve the untrammeled quality, Black Canyon NP would follow the MRDG process to ensure that administration of the wilderness seeks to minimize mechanized activities, including the use of chainsaws and helicopters, and to minimize manipulation of the natural environment. Black Canyon NP would also enhance guidelines for research and scientific installations in wilderness that would be consistent with the preservation and management of wilderness.

This alternative authorizes commercial guided climbing in the Black Canyon inner canyon wilderness primitive subzone. Detailed information about conditions for climbing, kayaking, and other activities would be available to visitors so they may make informed choices about challenges, planning, and assuming risks.

In the inner canyon wilderness zone, B.A.S.E. jumping and paragliding activity would diminish natural qualities through potential effects on nesting peregrine falcons and impacts to soils and vegetation at launch and landing sites and retrieval routes. The activities of jumping, flying, and retrieval would significantly diminish opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation for other visitors. There would be concern for visitors who could be jeopardized by B.A.S.E. jumpers at proposed designated campsites at the bottom of the canyon. Therefore, it is determined that paragliding and B.A.S.E. jumping are inconsistent with the wilderness character of the inner canyon and would not be authorized.

Black Canyon: Uplands Zone

The desired conditions for the upland wilderness zone would be wild, natural, expansive, peaceful, and adventuresome; the experience would be of solitude. Objectives for wilderness quality would be to accept short-term “trammeling” for the long-term benefits to the natural and untrammelled qualities; maintain and improve the undeveloped qualities; protect opportunities for solitude; and enhance opportunities for primitive recreation.

Three subzones have been developed and would be applied to more efficiently manage the uplands zone. These subzones are the uplands primitive wilderness, uplands pristine wilderness, and uplands backcountry described herein.

Uplands Primitive Wilderness Subzone. The desired condition for the uplands primitive wilderness subzone would be described as remote and approachable. Objectives would include maintaining opportunities for solitude, maintaining expansive natural views, reducing the impacts of invasive plants and livestock grazing, and providing a quality wilderness character that invites visitors to enjoy the experience of wilderness.

Uplands Pristine Wilderness Subzone. The desired conditions for the uplands pristine wilderness subzone are described as untamed, isolated, and free. Visitors would need to be independent and skilled to safely access the subzone and the area would foster people’s connection to wild places. Objectives would include maintaining wildness, improving naturalness, preserving outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, providing opportunities for self-reliance and adventure, and inspiring those who enter and those who view wilderness from overlooks to value wild places.

Uplands Backcountry Subzone. The desired conditions for the uplands backcountry subzone would be described as untamed and isolated; visitors would need to be skilled to safely access the subzone and the area would foster people’s connection to wild places. Objectives would include maintaining wildness, improving naturalness, preserving outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, providing opportunities for self-reliance and adventure; minimal recreational developments; and inspiring those who enter and those who view the area from overlooks to value wild places. The uplands backcountry subzone would be managed similarly to the uplands primitive wilderness subzone without the legal and policy requirements of wilderness.

Proposed Actions for the Black Canyon Upland Zone. To emphasize restoration of natural qualities, the uplands zone would be the focus of the most active and intensive program of invasive plant removal and native plant/habitat restoration. The NPS would become more engaged with the BLM regarding management of grazing permits to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of natural, untrammelled, and undeveloped qualities of wilderness. Unnecessary facilities and structures would be removed, including livestock structures that are unused. Additional fencing, while it would diminish the undeveloped quality of wilderness, may be necessary to improve natural qualities by discouraging trespass grazing. The park would continue to engage with other agencies and nongovernmental organizations to monitor and improve the habitat for Gunnison Sage-grouse, a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

Elk would continue to be managed by CPW, and the NPS would emphasize protection of wilderness character (e.g., scrutiny of radio collaring). Guided by the current fire management plan, managers would seek opportunities to enhance the role of natural fire in the ecosystem, when appropriate.

The uplands zone (wilderness and non-wilderness) would remain relatively free of recreational development, with freedom to hike, cross-country ski, and camp. There would be no designated campsites or toilet facilities. Visitors would be expected to follow appropriate leave-no-trace guidance for human waste (using personal human waste pack-out bags for storage and transport) and for minimum impact camping. Outstanding opportunities for solitude would be maintained by monitoring wilderness character and making management adjustments possible if change occurs. As part of maintaining and improving self-reliance, comprehensive guidance for signs in wilderness would be developed to ensure they are essential for route finding and as minimal and as unobtrusive as possible.

The main difference between the uplands primitive wilderness and the uplands pristine wilderness subzones would be trail presence. The uplands primitive wilderness subzone has existing trails, a few signs, and more trails could be added, while the pristine wilderness subzone has no trails and would remain trail-less and without signs. Horse use would continue to be allowed on Deadhorse Trail and on possible future extensions of this trail. Leashed pets would only be allowed on Rim Rock Trail, Cedar Point Nature Trail, and North Rim Chasm View Nature Trail. Pets would not be allowed elsewhere in the uplands backcountry or wilderness.

In the wilderness areas, regardless of being designated wilderness or eligible for wilderness study, Black Canyon NP would follow the MRDG process to minimize mechanized activities, including the use of chainsaws and helicopters, and to minimize manipulation of the natural environment. The park would also implement guidelines for research and scientific installations in wilderness that would be consistent with the preservation and management of wilderness.

Baseline soundscape and night sky data would be collected, and conditions monitored in the uplands zone. To protect the Class I air quality around Black Canyon of the Gunnison Wilderness, an air monitoring station would be established near, but outside the wilderness area.

There are presently no commercial services provided in the uplands zone. Opportunities for climbing, fishing, and kayaking/rafting do not exist in the upland terrain. Commercial service opportunities for hiking, camping, overnight use, and educational tours would protect and enhance the desired wilderness character in this zone. These activities are determined necessary for realizing the wilderness purposes of the area or for protecting and enhancing the desired conditions for wilderness character for this zone, which is peaceful, expansive, and has opportunities for solitude. These commercial services could foster new opportunities for visitors with limited previous wilderness experience. There is only one horse trail, which does not make commercial use for this activity viable in this zone.

Black Canyon: Gunnison Gorge Interface Wilderness Zone

The Gunnison Gorge interface wilderness zone encompasses both inner canyon and uplands along the western boundary of Black Canyon NP, adjacent to the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness within the BLM-managed Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area. This zone provides access to Black Canyon NP from the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area.

Black Canyon opens slightly and is less deep within the rugged Gunnison Gorge; river morphology becomes more amenable to rafting, which becomes more feasible and common from a point 1 mile within Black Canyon NP. All lands within the Gunnison Gorge wilderness zone are designated wilderness.

The desired conditions for the Gunnison Gorge interface wilderness zone would be wild, natural, rugged, awesome, remote, challenging, unspoiled, and uncrowded. The visitor experience would be challenging for individuals who are adventurous, self-reliant, and possess wilderness skills.

Objectives for wilderness qualities would be to maintain and improve the untrammelled character, protect and improve natural quality, maintain and improve the undeveloped character, and maintain and improve opportunities for solitude. The NPS and BLM would continue to coordinate activities to meet these objectives.

Proposed Actions for the Gunnison Gorge Interface Wilderness Zone. The two agencies currently cooperate on management of this area, and this cooperation would continue to be enhanced. The BLM and NPS would develop an interagency agreement to formalize joint management to preserve and improve wilderness character. The agreement would address management of and access to the campsites, permits, and blending regulations between agencies to achieve consistency for visitor enjoyment, resource protection, and preserving wilderness character. For example, leashed dogs may be allowed at the two campsites in Margaritaville to be consistent with rules downstream. The two agencies would also cooperate on developing a proposed new trail following the undesignated trail from Chukar Road to a canyon overlook within the park (part of the proposed South Rim Red Rock to Chukar Trail connection).

Within this cooperative management zone, current commercial services would continue, and the BLM would continue to manage the commercial use authorizations.

The two agencies would cooperate in developing joint connecting trail opportunities (South Rim Red Rock to Chukar Trail connection, loop, and overlook spur). Pets would not be allowed on the connecting trail to provide consistent rules within the park.

CURECANTI NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Two management zones are proposed for the backcountry of Curecanti NRA. Additional visitor activities are proposed in some zones (figure 4).

Curecanti East Portal-Morrow Point Backcountry Zone

This zone includes the backcountry undeveloped areas in Curecanti NRA from Blue Mesa Dam to the boundary with Black Canyon NP. There is no designated or eligible wilderness in the EPMP backcountry zone.

The desired conditions for the EPMP backcountry zone would be remote, uncrowded, natural, scenic, peaceful, relaxing, rugged, and secluded. The objectives for backcountry qualities would be to protect and improve natural qualities, keep non-recreational development to a minimum, and recognize and enhance unique and remote backcountry experiences while protecting solitude.

Proposed Actions for EPMP Backcountry Zone. Visitors would continue to enjoy a peaceful setting for hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, canoeing, kayaking, climbing, and viewing this extraordinary and remote canyon segment above Morrow Point and Crystal reservoirs. A new hiking trail would be considered on the south side of Morrow Point Reservoir from Pine Creek to Blue Creek. Horse use, bicycling, and motorized use of trails would not be allowed in the EPMP backcountry zone. Leashed pets would be allowed on trails. Backcountry campsites would be maintained and made available on a first-come, first-served basis. Signs in the backcountry would be kept to the minimum necessary for route finding, and would be small and wood-routed to fit with the environment.

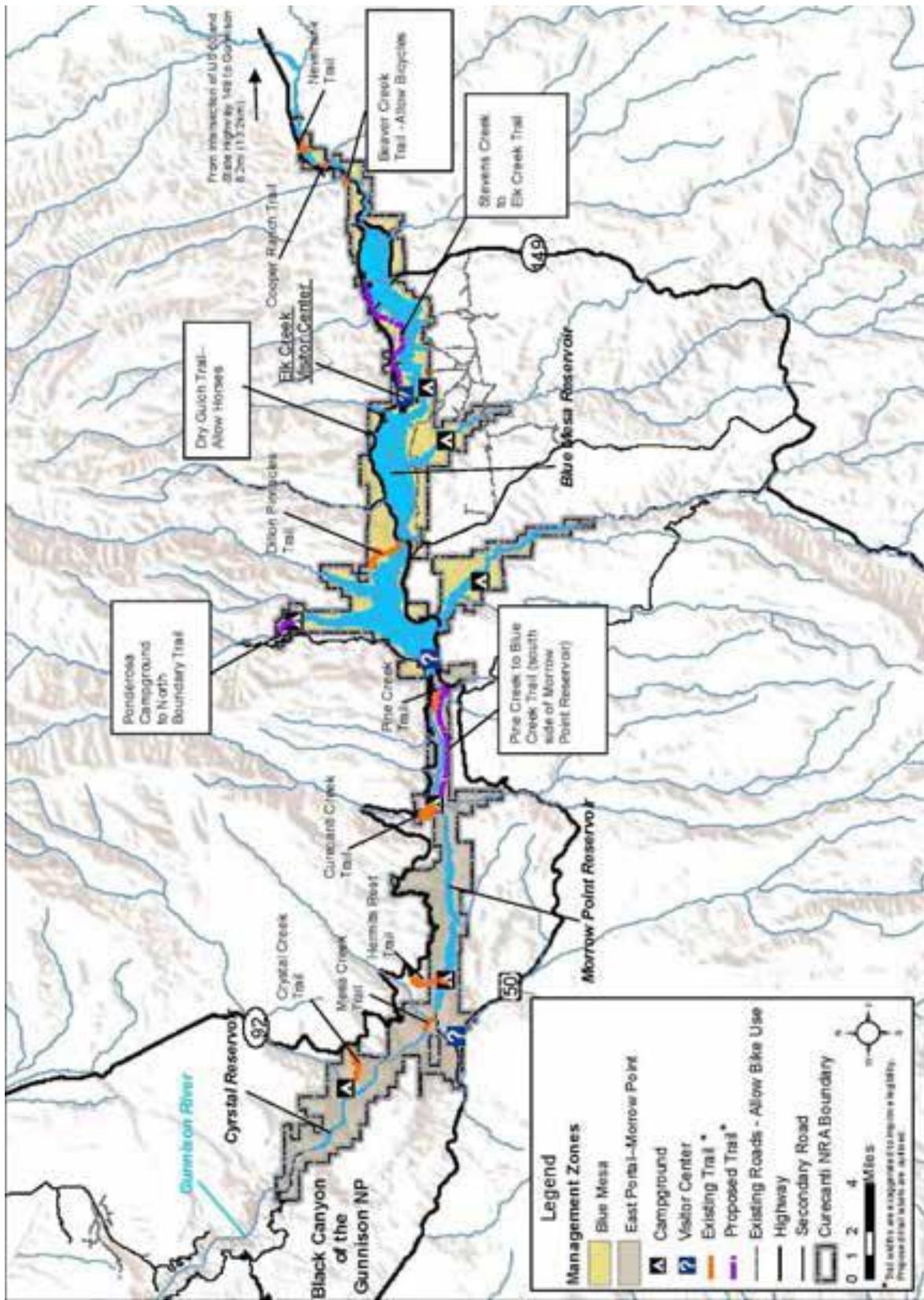


FIGURE 4. CURECANTI NRA PROPOSED MANAGEMENT ZONES

Managers would continue present treatments and would likely increase efforts to remove invasive plant species while restoring native habitat. Rare and/or sensitive plant species would continue to be monitored and managed in consultation with other federal and state agencies. The current fire management plan would guide actions regarding wildfire. Baseline soundscape and night sky data would be collected, and conditions monitored in the EPMP zone. To protect natural qualities and the remote experience provided visitors using this backcountry zone, key indicators and measures would be monitored and possible management adjustments may be incorporated should conditions change.

There is some climbing activity in the EPMP zone; thus, the proposed climbing management plan for Curecanti NRA would address the unique needs of this area. In general, new fixed anchors or bolts would be allowed with prior NPS authorization; replacement hardware would be allowed under specific guidance. Access permits would not be required in this zone, and no change is foreseen, although use, hardware, and access impacts would be monitored. Peregrine falcons would continue to be monitored and seasonal closures implemented to protect active nests (ledges and alcoves in the canyon walls and on other geologic exposures).

There are currently no commercial services on the land-based backcountry of the EPMP zone, but the activities of hiking, climbing, and educational tours meet all of the criteria for necessary and appropriate commercial services, and could be authorized in the future. Some activities were determined not to be necessary or appropriate for commercial services. Camping, fishing, or boating at Crystal Reservoir would compromise public safety because of unpredictable and swift water releases. Horseback riding in the steep terrain would risk excessive erosion and vegetation impacts. Due to the limited campsites available, guided camping or overnight use would monopolize opportunities for the general public in this zone. Based on recommendations from CPW, commercially guided fishing would significantly impact the fishery in East Portal. Proposals for necessary and appropriate commercial services would be evaluated, with consideration of the goals of protecting and enhancing the natural and remote backcountry in this zone.

Paragliding, hang gliding, and B.A.S.E. jumping would continue to be prohibited.

Curecanti: Blue Mesa Backcountry Zone

This zone includes the land between the eastern Curecanti NRA boundary near Neversink, west to Blue Mesa Dam. The desired conditions for this zone would be remote, uncrowded, natural, expansive, open, and rural. The overall objectives for backcountry qualities include protecting and improving natural qualities, keeping non-recreational development to a minimum, and enhancing landbased recreational opportunities.

Proposed Actions for Blue Mesa Backcountry Zone. Visitors would continue to enjoy hiking, horseback riding, camping, off-highway motorized access in designated areas, and hunting and fishing with valid state licenses. Backcountry recreation opportunities would be increased in Blue Mesa by creating additional opportunities for hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians. A new multipurpose trail (for hiking, bicycling, and equestrian use) could be constructed from Stevens Creek to Elk Creek, and a new trail for hiker and equestrian use would be considered near Ponderosa Campground to connect with adjacent USFS lands. Equestrian use would be allowed through Dry Gulch Campground and on Dry Gulch Trail to connect with adjacent public lands; bicycles would be allowed on Beaver Creek Trail. These trails would provide opportunities for hikers, mountain bikers, and horses. Horse use would be allowed in areas and on routes that are proposed for motorized vehicle access in the Motorized Vehicle Access Plan. Additional areas below the high water line would be considered for horse use as the necessary cultural resource evaluations are conducted. Leashed pets would be allowed on trails. Motorized use would continue to be allowed on designated routes and shore areas identified in the

Curecanti National Recreation Area Motorized Vehicle Access Plan / Environmental Assessment. Bicycles and horses would be allowed in the same areas as the off-highway vehicles.

Boat-in camping along the shoreline would continue, both at developed campsites and elsewhere in the backcountry. Signs in the backcountry would be kept to the minimum necessary for route finding, and would be small and wood-routed to fit with the environment.

Managers would continue to increase efforts to remove invasive plants and restore natural habitat. Rare and sensitive plant species would continue to be monitored and managed in consultation with other federal and state agencies. The NPS would become more engaged with the BLM with respect to management of livestock grazing permits to ensure the enhancement of the natural qualities of the backcountry. The park would continue to engage with appropriate agencies and nongovernmental organizations to monitor and improve the habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse, a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Elk would continue to be managed by CPW. The current fire management plan would guide actions regarding wildfire. Baseline soundscape and night sky data would be collected and conditions monitored in the Blue Mesa zone. To protect natural qualities and the backcountry experience in this zone, a few key indicators and measures would be monitored and possible management adjustments enacted should conditions change.

Current commercial uses in the Blue Mesa backcountry zone include a commercial use authorization for horses. Necessary and appropriate commercial services for this zone include hiking, climbing, camping, fishing, boating, kayaking, horseback riding, educational tours, and bicycles and motorized vehicles on routes and areas designated in the Motorized Vehicle Access Plan. Proposals would be evaluated with consideration of the goals of protecting and enhancing the natural and remote backcountry in this zone.

There are no suitable locations for launching paragliders, hang gliders, or B.A.S.E. jumps in the Blue Mesa backcountry management zone. While emergency landing of paragliders and hang gliders launching from nearby BLM land would continue, there would be no need to provide a permanent landing site within NPS-managed lands as there is adequate opportunity for safe landings elsewhere in the area.

ALTERNATIVE C

This alternative is the same as Alternative B in every way with one exception. To attain the greatest opportunities for challenge, self-reliance, and adventure that are paramount to the wilderness character of the inner canyon wilderness zone, no commercial services would be authorized in the Black Canyon inner canyon wilderness zone.